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AUTHOR	Okwumbua, Jebose O.; Howell, Stanley; Jones, Alvin R.
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ABSTRACT

African American youth, although they comprise only 6% of the U.S. population, rank first for incarceration and homicide. In West Tennessee, the Juvenile Court of Memphis and Shelby County Report indicated that African American male youths were likely to become delinquent early in the second grade, were six times as likely to be referred on aggravated assault charges, and were taken into protective custody four times as often as their White counterparts. The project aimed to prevent the incidence of violence and other problem behaviors among at-risk African American male youths who resided in urban and rural West Tennessee by assisting them in developing positive self-esteem, teaching them decision-making and conflict resolution skills, and exposing them to their rich culture and heritage. Subjects were 127 African American male students in third through sixth grade from urban and rural public schools. The intervention consisted of decision-making skills training, conflict resolution training, and cultural awareness, all delivered during 48 weekly sessions. The primary findings from this investigation were the improvement in participants' concepts of their physical characteristics and strengthened ethnic identity. Challenges and implications for similar programming for "at risk" youth are discussed. (Contains 10 references.) (SLD)

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Saving Lives And Minds
A Community-Based Violence Prevention Project

Jebose O. Okwumbua, Ph.D.
The University of Memphis
Memphis, Tennessee

Stanley Howell, B.S.
West Tennessee Area Health Education Center
Memphis, Tennessee

Alvin R. Jones, B.S.
West Tennessee Area Health Education Center
Memphis, Tennessee

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Abstract

The United States ranks first among industrialized nations in violent death rates. African American male youths, though they comprise only 6% of U.S. population, ranked first in incarceration and homicide. In West Tennessee, the Juvenile Court of Memphis and Shelby County Report indicated that African American male youths were likely to become delinquent early in the second grade, were six times as likely to be referred on aggravated assault charges, and were taken into protective custody 4 times as often as their white counterparts. The project aimed to prevent the incidence of violence and other problem behaviors among "at-risk" African American male youths who resided in urban and rural West Tennessee by assisting them in developing positive self-esteem, teaching them decision-making and conflict resolution skills, and exposing them to their rich culture and heritage. Subjects comprised a sample of 127 African American male students in third through sixth grades drawn from urban and rural public schools. The primary findings from this investigation were the improvement in participants' concept of their physical characteristics and ethnic identity. Challenges and implications for similar programming for "at risk" youth are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal violence among youth in the United States has reached an epidemic proportion. The United States ranks first among industrialized nations in violent death rates (U.S. DHH, 1990). While violent death rates for African American males remains higher than their white counterparts, the most striking observation is that these rates are higher among younger to young adult African American males. For example, in 1989, the homicide death rate (per 100,000) ranged from 114.8 to 112.6 males between 15 to 34 years compared to a range of 46.2 to 30.2 for African American males between the ages 45 to 64 years (U.S. DHH, 1990).

African American male youths, though they comprise only 6% of U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990), ranked first in incarceration and homicide (U.S. DHH, 1990). In West Tennessee, the Juvenile Court of Memphis/Shelby County Report (1994) indicated that African American male youths were likely to become delinquent early in the second grade, were six times as likely to be referred on aggravated assault charges, and were taken into protective custody 4 times as often as their white counterparts. During the same period, the Fayette County (a rural county located 46 miles east of Memphis/Shelby County) had processed 1,860 cases of African American juvenile offenders.

The scientific literature indicates that poor self-esteem and deficiency in decision-making and conflict resolution skills in youth are linked to a variety of risky behaviors such as drug use, violence, poor academic performance, and disrespect for authority (Bachman, J.G. & O'Malley, P.M., 1986; Young, M., Werch, C.E., & Bakema, D., 1989). Physical fighting has often resulted in several cases of homicide and uncounted numbers of nonfatal injuries among young people each year. Fighting is the most immediate antecedent behavior for a greater proportion of the homicide

occurring in this age group (U.S. DHH, 1990). A reduction in the incidence of physical fighting by helping the high risk population develop positive self-esteem may be critical in disrupting the causal mechanisms of homicide and other forms of problem behavior among this population.

Purpose

In order to address the problem of violence among African American youth, the West Tennessee Area Health Education Center (WTAHEC) developed a community-based project called "Saving Lives And Minds" (SLAM). Specifically, SLAM was designed to programmatically address the incidence of violence, delinquency, and other problem behaviors among "at-risk" African American male youths who resided in urban and rural West Tennessee. The implementation of the project was a cooperative effort among WTAHEC, the University of Memphis, and two public school systems in urban and rural settings. Project personnel aimed to reduce and prevent delinquency and other problem behaviors among project participants by assisting them in developing positive self-esteem via exposure to information regarding the development of self-concept, teaching them decision-making and conflict resolution skills as well as exposing them to their rich culture and heritage.

METHODS

Subjects

Subjects comprised a convenient sample of 127 African American male students in third through sixth grades drawn from two inner-city public schools and two rural public schools. The students ranged in age from 8 to 14 years with an average age of 10.4 years. All participants were from a low socioeconomic neighborhoods. Some students were overage for their grade. The counselors and school

administrators at the participating schools used a set of criteria to identify at-risk students to participate in the project. The criteria included chronic disciplinary problems, poor academic record and school attendance, poor social skills, and disrespect for authority.

Procedures

Of 217 students who enrolled in the project, approximately 59 % (N=127) completed all project activities including preprogram assessment, intervention, and post-assessment. Participants and their parents completed a consent form indicating their willingness to participate in the project, their understanding that the information provided would be confidential, and that the findings would be used to provide better understanding of ways to improve socio-cognitive skills of African American male youths.

Pre and post data were collected via a self-administered questionnaire conducted in two sessions by two health educators trained in the technique. The questionnaire was administered at each of the four participating schools before and after the implementation of program activities. A one-tailed *t-test* was performed to examine the effects of program intervention on participants' self-esteem with emphasis on physical self-concept, attitudes towards neighborhood, school, and African Americans. The probability level of statistical significance was establish at $p = .05$.

Instrumentation

Paper-and-pencil measures were utilized to collect pre and post intervention data. The Stephan-Rosenfield Racial Attitude Scale (Stephan & Rosenfield,1979) and Banks Attitude Scale (Banks, 1984) were used to assess students level of self-esteem.

The Stephan-Rosenfield Scale was used to assess students attitudes toward

African Americans. The scale includes 10 items, each consisting of two paired adjectives, such as "happy; sad". For each adjective, students were asked to judge African Americans as a group by circling the response closest to their opinion. The Banks Attitude Scale used in this study comprised three subscales: physical self-concept (10 items, e.g., "I like the color of my skin); attitudes toward school (11 items, e.g., "I like school"); and attitudes towards neighborhood (8 items, e.g., "wish I lived in another neighborhood"). The students were asked to indicate their extent of agreement or disagreement with each statement.

Scoring of these instruments was reversed on the items that are negatively worded, so that all items with a low score suggests high self-esteem. That is, low mean scores at post assessment suggest an improvement in participants' self-esteem after program intervention.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Decision-Making Instrument was used to assess students' baseline decision-making skill level (CDC, 1984). The instrument allows for the examination of student understanding of the general decision-making process. It comprises a series of scenarios describing a young person in the process of making a decision. For each scenario, selected steps of the decision-making process (i.e., defining the decision; identifying alternative courses of action; weighing costs/benefits of alternative; making a decision and carrying it out) are provided either in the scenario and/or in a series of choices that follow each scenario. Students were asked to read each scenario silently (with assistance by the session facilitator as needed), determine which steps, if any, in the decision-making process have been taken, and select from three options, the next step the individual in the scenario should take in order to make a "wise" decision.

The scoring key for this instrument employed the following method of annotation in analyzing students' responses to the scenarios: *skipped step* (a response that

describes the decision making steps that occur after the correct step); *repeated step* (a step that describes one of the decision-making steps that has already occurred); *ineffective implementation of a step* (a response that describes the decision-making step that is clearly inconsistent with one or more of the step's characteristics); and *deflective action* (a response that is unrelated to effective decision-making and may deflect the decision maker from taking necessary action). The instrument has been found to be reliable and valid in assessing decision making skill among children and youth (CDC, 1984).

Intervention

The intervention consisted of three components: decision-making skills training; conflict resolution training; and cultural awareness. Treatment exposure involved a duration of 48 weekly sessions (50 minutes per session). They varied in scope and included didactic presentation or experiential activities related to decision making process, conflict resolution techniques, and African/African American culture and heritage. Information on developing self-concept was an integral part of the intervention modalities.

The following three educational approaches were employed in teaching program participants effective decision-making and conflict resolution skills: (a) *formal instruction* to familiarize participants with the four-step decision making process and its utility; (b) *question-answer group discussions* to demonstrate how to evaluate the costs/benefits in making specific decisions; and (c) *role play, trigger films* to show participants how to apply the learned decision making process to everyday situations involving health and social choices.

Conflict resolution training module included valuing yourself, taking a stand, recognizing a conflict, and dealing with conflict. Role playing and group discussions

were important and strong components of training activities. In addition, trigger films were used to generate discussions and group interactions relative to ways to resolve conflict without violence.

Four field trips were conducted as a means of enhancing program participants awareness of, and appreciation for African and African American history and culture. The outings included trips to the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, and to the Brooks Museum in Memphis to see the "The Black Diamonds" Exhibit (the Negro Baseball League of the early 1900). Some of the former league members were available to respond to students' questions. In addition to these outings, students were introduced to the Blues music and the role African Americans played in it's history during regular weekly sessions. They were also exposed to African and African American history highlighting the contributions of Africa to world civilization as well as the contributions of African Americans in the development of the United States of America during class sessions.

RESULTS

A one-tailed *t-test* was employed to examine whether or not there was an improvement in participants' self-esteem relative to their appraisal of physical self-concept, attitudes toward neighborhood, school, and African Americans. Improvement was indicated by a decrease in mean scores from pre to post program intervention. In general, there was a decrease in the mean scores from pre to post among participants for physical self-concept (p=.001). An analysis on each item revealed a statistically significant improvement for participants' perception of their physical characteristics (i.e., "looks") (p=.001), and their ethnic identity (p=.002). Specifically, program participants provided favorable responses to items such as "I like the way I look", "I like the color of my hair", "I like my nose". There was no statistically significant difference in mean scores from pre to post intervention relative to how their classmates perceived

them as well as their perception of themselves in comparison to other children (p=.200).

There was no significant difference in the mean scores between pre and post intervention in terms of participants' attitude toward their neighborhood (p=.174). The only item that showed an improvement was their relationship with their peers in the neighborhood (p=.001). Similar to the participants' attitude toward their neighborhood, there was no significant difference in their mean scores for attitude toward school at pre and post data points.

The mean scores on the Stephan-Rosenfield Racial Attitude Scale for participants' attitude toward their African American peers indicated a significant difference in the participants' mean scores from pre to post intervention (p=.011). Specifically, participants indicated that most Black students are "helpful" (p=.001), "neat" (p=.006), and "work hard" (p=.006).

DISCUSSION

The project was designed to reduce and prevent delinquency and other problem behaviors among project participants by assisting them in developing positive self-esteem via exposure to information regarding the development of self-concept, effective decision making strategies, conflict resolution techniques, and cultural enhancement activities. The primary findings from this investigation were the improvement in participants' concept of their physical characteristics and ethnic identity. While participants' physical self-concept and appreciation of their ethnic identity improved upon completion of program activities, their attitudes toward their neighborhood and school did not. The findings must be interpreted with caution because of the small sample size (N=127), the non-random selection of the participants, and the absence of a control sample. However, this preliminary

investigation underscores a critical need for community-based agencies, urban universities, and school systems to work together toward violence prevention particularly among African American male youth.

While this study has some limitations, it raises questions about the impact, if any, young people's attitude toward their neighborhood has on disciplinary problems, academic performance, and other problem behaviors. It has been suggested that a negative self-concept and negative perceptions of school tend to result in poor school performance and problem behaviors among children and youth (Ford, 1985; Reddy, 1978). If this assumption has merit, then it may be appropriate to speculate that negative perceptions of the neighborhood in which a student resides may also negatively influence his/her attitude toward school, which may subsequently result in disciplinary problems and poor school performance. Students who participated in this program were identified based on certain characteristics such as chronic disciplinary problems, poor academic record, poor school attendance, and disrespect for authority. Students' mean scores for attitude toward their neighborhood and school did not improve between pre and post program implementation. Although the implications of this finding is not clear, it is important to consider the role of adult males in these communities relative to their interaction with children and youth who reside in this community.

The interaction of adult males with youth in their neighborhoods is clearly not evident in the students' response to the question concerning their neighborhood. The majority of these students live in single female parent household where an adult male presence is missing. The presence and interaction of adult males with male youths in the targeted population is critical in raising the young people's cultural awareness, social skills, and an appreciation for their neighborhood. It is hoped that the involvement of adult males in this area will subsequently prevent academic failure,

delinquency, violent behavior, and the involvement of the at risk youth in the juvenile justice system.

A program of this nature and magnitude has major challenges. Identifying and enrolling students into the program was a major task. One reason for their resistance to enroll in the program was the perception that they were "problem children". The school counselors were very instrumental in helping them to debunk the perception that this program was for "problem children". This was achieved by encouraging them to participate because they would benefit from the program.

Getting students involved in the program once they enrolled was also a challenge. Because students' participation was not strictly voluntary, concerted efforts were made by program staff to develop rapport with participants prior to program activities. This effort took much longer than anticipated, approximately four weeks into the school year. Recreation and games, individual and small group interactions with project staff, and refreshments are examples of strategies to obtain their involvement. Attendance and participation appeared to increase as the students' comfort level increased.

Another major challenge was obtaining parental involvement in the project. All efforts made to gain their participation failed, and there was no specific feedback for not participating. The lack of initial involvement of school administrators may have adversely contributed to the unwillingness of parents to participate. In this regard, it is critical that full support of school administrators be obtained and clearly visible to the parents. Future similar programs should endeavor to obtain parental involvement during the initial stage of project development.

Finally, coordinating program units (i.e., decision-making, conflict resolution, and cultural awareness) was also challenging. It is important to conduct each of these units of intervention in a timely fashion without compromising each other in terms of

duration and content of program activities. If these units are effectively integrated, intervention will be more efficacious and probably yield better results.

Violence is a major public health problem in our society today, particularly among African American youth. Findings from this study suggest two areas that need to be closely examined relative to their potential influence on self-esteem of young African Americans. The neighborhood and the school environment seem to be areas of concern. It is not specifically clear how these factors impact on violence incidence. Nevertheless, future similar studies need to systematically examine the impact of attitudes toward neighborhood and school environment have on self-esteem, academic and school performance, and interpersonal violence among the nation's at risk youth, particularly African American male youth. Prevention practitioners who work regularly with "at risk" children and youth are encouraged to consider both the neighborhood and school areas in prevention modalities.

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